Rabbi Ma'ayan Sands Kol Nidre 5780, p. 352 Temple B'nai Shalom, Braintree

Brokenness is not a problem

It always takes at least three drafts of a sermon before I have something worthy of sharing with you. It is a process. I start by listening to my heart and figuring out what is bothering me; about what do I feel strongly and want to share. I research. I immerse myself in writing. I think it's pretty good. I read it to my husband, Rick. I see in his face, he is underwhelmed. I am crushed. He reminds me: "It's ok. This is part of the process." What "this" is he referring to? It is inevitable that I will have to break what I'd written and rebuild it; probably several times. Rick was right because during the process of writing, breaking and re-writing this d'var Torah, I found exactly the right message for tonight - **brokenness is not a problem**; it is the start of creation. It is the opportunity for a new beginning.

It's hard to define brokenness. If we assign it to ourselves or to others in a metaphysical way-we are being judgmental. Who is to say that when I was divorced, my family was broken? Or that because I feel depressed that I myself am broken? Are broken and whole opposites? When we strive to make parts of a physical object whole, are we fixing it? Is the goal to avoid brokenness? Or can we learn to use it constructively? As part of a process leading to something "better"?

Several months after our 4th child was born, we acquired a bassett hound. He lived in a house on our mailman's route, with his biological mother. The family was divorcing (not breaking, just not living together anymore) and they wanted to find homes for the dogs. One day the postal carrier delivered our mail and held out a leash attached to a dog. Could we take him in to be our dog? I don't remember responding but suddenly, we had 4 children and a dog! Our youngest was 11 months old and already walking. On the first day of our extended family, the baby held up a rattle and shook it. The bassett hound was frightened, ran from the place he was resting knocking over the baby; who crawled away. The dog had broken his leg but we were told the only way we would know for sure, was to take an x-ray in a couple of months and see new bone growth! It was broken, but the break was not visible. It would become whole, naturally, in its own time. Perhaps, brokenness striving to become whole is nature's instinct.

Brokenness, usually coupled with an image of wholeness, is central on several significant occasions in Jewish ritual. The 3 wavering **blasts** of *shevarim* on the shofar, come from the Hebrew root word "*shever*" meaning broken**.** These three broken notes express our feelings on the High Holy days. We look at ourselves; acknowledge our imperfections and our missteps. Have we hurt others, intentionally

or unintentionally? But *shevarim* gives way to *tekiyah* and ultimately to *tekiah gadola* - the prolonged, unbroken sound representing our final offerings of sincere atonement. Brokenness begins our return to wholeness.

Similarly, our Seder begins with an act of creating brokenness. The division of the middle matzah– *yahatz*–takes place *early* in the seder. The eating of the retrieved part of the broken matzah comes after ransoming it from the children, at the *end* of the Seder. The hidden matzah is the bigger part. The promise of the future is greater than the achievements of the past. Finding the afikomen is more than a game to keep the children engaged. It envisions a time of wholeness and peace, which we strive to attain. Rouse the child from his slumber at the Passover Seder, I say. Without her searching and finding, the Seder cannot be completed and the possibility of brokenness emerging as the beginning of *shleimut,* or wholeness, slips away. (It is interesting to note that s*hleimut, wholeness,* is from the same root as shalom.)

Finally, we are familiar with breaking the glass at the conclusion of a Jewish wedding. With the bride and groom standing under the wedding canopy, the groom stomps on a glass (which is contained in a bag) and shatters it. Within the shouts of mazal tov (which means "good luck") inevitably at least one person comments: "that's probably the last time he'll put his foot down in that marriage!") Some interpret breaking the glass as a reminder of the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem. Even in the midst of new beginnings and great joy, we must remember the more troublesome parts of our people's history. It has been Rick's and my custom to give as a wedding gift, the cup to break, the bag to put it in and the glass container which will become a *mezuzzah*. The broken shards will be put into a glass tube, surrounded by a beautiful piece of art and hung, with appropriate blessings, on a wall in the couple's home. Once again brokenness can be put together to create a new beginning.

You might be aware that many of the Jewish holidays have a relationship with an historical event in Jewish history. Passover is related to the exodus from Egypt. Chanukah, to the defeat of the powerful Greeks by the Maccabees. Given the centrality of the High Holy Days, the Rabbis of the Talmud asked: "what about the Days of Awe– what historical event corresponds to them?" Rashi, the medieval French commentator wrote: the historical connection related to Yom Kippur is the giving of the second set of tablets on Mt. Sinai. His theory is complicated for our modern minds, but it is based on the sequence of Moshe's 3, 40 day stays on the mountain with God. Moshe's first trip to the mountain top was to receive the commandments. His second trip was required because he had broken the tablets in a fit of anger over the Golden Calf. The third trek up the mountain is about a new set of tablets, made by

Moshe, with God's help. Yom Kippur is connected to the history of the broken tablets and the man Moses helping create new, whole ones. It corresponds to our process of teshuva. We have acknowledged our brokenness to ourselves and to God and we commit to strive to become our more whole selves.

But that can't be the end of the story about the tablets. Please close your eyes if you are comfortable doing that; take a deep, slow inhale and envision Moshe trekking down the mountain for the 3rd time. He must be filled with awe and gratitude for God's compassionate and generous attitude toward the Israelites. He is grasping the new, whole tablets with all his strength. But there is something missing from this picture. What happened to the remains of the smashed, first set? the broken tablets? Surely the sages did not believe those sacred fragments were abandoned on the mountain?! After all, the Torah reports they were created by God alone. Answering the question about the broken first tablets, reveals the crux of my Yom Kippur message: ***Brokenness is not a problem; it is the start of creation. It is the opportunity for a new beginning.***

According to rabbinic midrash, the *broken* tablets were placed in the holy Ark side by side with the *intact* whole second set. (Talmud Bava Batra 14b). The broken and the whole …together; both holy; both revered by humankind and loved by God. What a profound metaphor for our lives; for the brokenness we all hold *and* the striving toward wholeness and holiness with which we engage.

Rabbinic commentary on the book of Leviticus tells us: "As human beings, we are often ashamed to use imperfect vessels. Not so with the Holy Blessed One. We are all broken, and we are all God's vessels."

Brokenness is part of the fabric of life. It is integral to the human condition. None of us is immune from it. In God's eyes, brokenness does not diminish holiness; quite the contrary. The High Holy days encourage us to embrace our reality and move from acceptance to a deep honoring of the brokenness we carry. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, a contemporary modern Orthodox rabbi, said "there is nothing so whole as an open, broken heart." Only then can we really hear God's words of love for us. The issue becomes: how do we manage the vulnerability that comes from entering this period of self-examination and truth telling, of brokenness, pain and hurt in our lives, and combine it with hope and love enabling us to begin the healing process?

I have a short story for you.

For years, Dan Peterson and his wife Mary were inseparable. They met late in life and did everything together. “We just devoted ourselves to each other,” Dan said. “I had it all figured out: I was gonna die first. That’s no problem; until, all of a sudden, she was in the hospital for 35 days.”

Mary’s 80-year-old heart was beating abnormally fast. It went faster and faster until finally, after 35 days, it stopped. Dan sat by his wife’s unresponsive body for hours, trying to come to terms with his new reality.

Six months later, on dreaded “grocery-run-day”, Dan felt particularly depressed.

That day, Tara, a mother of 7, had her 4-year-old daughter Norah, in the shopping cart.

Dan and Tara passed each other in the dairy isle. “All of the sudden," Dan said, "I come to the end of the aisle, and there’s this little girl. She’s sort of bouncing up and down, and pointing at me. She said, ‘Hi, old person. Today’s my birfday.’ I didn’t know what old person she was talking to, but she kept pointing at me.”

Norah said to her Mom, “I thought he needed a friend, because he was sad,”

Norah made Dan smile. “It made my day, frankly,” he said.

They didn’t go far before Norah stopped her mother. “Can I take a picture with that old man for my birfday?" she asked. So, Tara doubled back, and the 81-year-old and the 4-year-old posed for a photo. Then Norah asked him for a hug.

"It was magical and profound,” Tara said.

In the days that followed, Norah wouldn’t stop asking her mom about "Mr. Dan." Was he lonely? Was he cold? Did he have enough cheese?

Tara posted Dan’s picture on Facebook. One comment caught her eye. A woman wrote she knew the man in the photo. She said it was the first time she’d seen him smile since his wife died. That’s when Tara decided to call Dan and ask to visit him. They planned a lunch. “We ended up spending almost three hours together,” Tara says. “I decided… we had to absorb him into our family of nine.”

They visited Dan weekly. Dan just slapped his knee and laughed watching Norah in constant motion. They planted seeds in the hot house he built. They watched the seedlings grow into squash. Dan joined Norah's family for holidays and birthdays. "He's never going to be alone again," Tara said

"Norah gave me something to live for," he said. "It's like the sun came out."

This 81year old man had lost his wife. His heart was broken. A four year old girl and her family gave him hope and love. They enabled him to become whole again. It was different from the wholeness he had with his wife, but whole, nevertheless.

During our lives we want to see and to be seen. We want genuine connection. That can happen only when we are willing to share our vulnerability with each other. There is a beautiful metaphor for the work we do during these high holy days. *"Kintsukuroi*" is "the [Japanese] art of restoring broken pottery with gold…so the fractures are literally illuminated. [The philosophy behind it is] that when something, or somebody, has suffered damage and has a history, it becomes more beautiful. The true life of an object (or a person) begins the moment it breaks and reveals that it is vulnerable.

Judaism brings us a worldview with a universal teaching: the broken shofar sound of *shevarim,* reaches toward wholeness in *tekiah gedolah*. We reclaim wholeness at our seders by uniting the broken matzo with the afikomen. We are aware of the brokenness we all hold during this season of creation and recreation, birth and rebirth. We turn to the One who created us, to help us create ourselves anew.

Let's not bury our broken shards, cover them up, or discard them. We can place them in our inner sanctuaries, in a place of honor. We can cherish them and hold them with tenderness. They are real, authentic and integral to who we are.

Ribono Shel olam May we always, but especially on these high holy days, find courage to cry out and know that God hears us, **not despite our broken parts but in them and through them. Amen**